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SUBJECT: FOOD SHORTAGES IN TIGRAY REGION DUE TO POOR 2008 RAINS

Summary

¶1. Local and regional officials, relief organizations, and affected communities report deterioration of food security in southern and eastern areas of Tigray Region. Failed belg rains and uneven meher rains in 2008 resulted in poor crop production, insufficient feed and pasture for livestock, and lack of water for human and animal consumption, threatening populations' livelihoods and coping mechanisms. Due to poor crop production and late and insufficient relief response, Tigray Region health officials report increased malnutrition rates among children under five years of age and pregnant and lactating mothers.

¶2. Shortages of water and food for human and animal consumption, malnutrition, and poor crop performance continue to constitute significant challenges for individuals in Tigray that require further attention. According to the October 2008 Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (GFDRE) Revised Humanitarian Requirements Document, more than 601,000 people outside the Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP) require at least three months of assistance in affected areas of Tigray. USAID and humanitarian organizations continue to closely monitor the situation and respond to needs. End summary.

Introduction

¶3. From December 14 to 20, a USAID Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA) program monitor traveled to Tigray to assess the impact of drought on food security, as well as the nutrition status of children and pregnant and lactating mothers. The program monitor met with regional and woreda officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and residents of eight drought-affected woredas, including Atsbi Wombera, Sasei Tsada Emba, and Kilte Awlalo in east Tigray and Hintalo-wajirat, Raya Azebo, Endamehoni, Alaje, and Enderta in south Tigray.

Crop Production and Impact on Emergency Food Aid

¶4. Late, uneven, and poor 2008 rains resulted in inadequate overall performance of long-cycle crops, such as maize, sorghum, and finger millet, compared to the previous five years. According to the NGO the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), long dry spells and late planting resulted in cultivation of only 28 percent of usual planned long-cycle crops.

¶5. During normal seasons, six woredas benefit from February to March belg rains, constituting 20 percent of annual production. However, planned crop production collapsed in 2008 due to belg rain failure. According to REST, farmers in Ofla Woreda only produced 10.8 percent of planned crops, and production completely failed in the five remaining belg-dependent woredas. Three of the woredas--Raya Azebo, Hintalo-wajirat, and Alamata---are among the ten Tigray Regional Early Warning, Response, and Food Security Bureau-designated malnutrition "hot spot" woredas. Similarly, the onset of the July to September kiremt rains in most affected woredas was late compared to previous years, and moisture-related stress resulting from poor amount and distribution of rainfall affected short-cycle crops, such as barley, wheat, teff, and pulses.

¶6. On October 14, 2008, the GFDRE revised the number of people requiring emergency assistance in Ethiopia from 4.6 million to 6.4 million people, including more than 601,000 individuals in Tigray outside of the PSNP. In addition to supporting three months of food rations, the Revised Humanitarian Requirements Document recommended establishing nutrition centers, distributing animal feed, destocking animals, and providing potable water through water tankering in affected woredas. Subsequent meher seasonal assessments, which have not yet been released, indicate that approximately the same number of people will require assistance through March 2009.

¶7. From October to December 2008, Early Warning and Response Department (EWRD) provided one to three months of food assistance to individuals in Tigray. Through the November to December allocation, REST is currently providing two months of food aid to approximately 145,000 people through the Joint Emergency Operation (JEOP). However, the authorized relief rations only includes 10 kg of cereal instead of a full 17.5 kg ration of cereal, oil, and pulses due to limited grain reserve stocks. Although JEOP provided REST with the full food basket for relief, the EWRD instructed REST to distribute a 10 kg ration. Without the official release of meher assessment results and EWRD emergency relief supplies allocations, vulnerable individuals in Tigray will not receive assistance after organizations exhaust December food allocations.

Livestock Production Concerns

¶8. In Tigray, livestock represent one of the main sources of livelihood and income generation, constituting a significant portion of a household's food and income and providing resiliency to drought. For instance, in more prosperous households of Irob Woreda, families earn 80 percent of income from livestock sales. However, due to successive poor or failed rains, lowland areas of Tigray are experiencing pronounced animal feed and water shortages, causing weakened animals to walk long distances in search of water. REST does not foresee potential feed source replenishment until belg and azmera rains commence in February and April 2009, expected to improve pasture and water availability in affected woredas until the main July to September kiremt rains begin.

¶9. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization and REST are providing grass and concentrate to 12,900 out of an estimated 40,573 vulnerable animals in the three most-affected woredas of Raya Azebo, Hintalo-wajirat, and Atsbi Wombera. According to REST and woreda officials, households are unable to commercially destock livestock in the local market due to lack of demand for animals in poor visible condition.

Increasing Malnutrition Rates

¶10. Tigray woreda officials expressed concern regarding increased malnutrition rates among children under five years of age and pregnant and lactating mothers. Results from the October 2008 Regional Health Bureau (RHB) nutrition assessment indicated an overall 9.6 percent increase in the global acute malnutrition (GAM) rate and 1 percent increase in the severe acute malnutrition (SAM) rate from the regional Enhanced Outreach Survey average in June 2008, increasing the GAM rate for children under five years of age to 18 percent and SAM rate to nearly 2 percent. The assessment included nearly 210,000 children aged 6 to 59 months and more than 37,000 pregnant and lactating mothers in 20 emergency nutrition hot spots.

¶11. In addition, Atsbi Womberta Woreda health officials report an increase in malnutrition rates from June to September 2008.

According to woreda health officials, the GAM rate increased from 8 percent to 19.9 percent, the SAM rate from less than 1 percent to 3.3 percent, and edema from zero to nearly 1 percent during this time period. In response to malnutrition concerns in Tigray, RHB and the Regional Early Warning and Food Security Bureau stressed the need for the Emergency Nutrition Coordination Unit (ENCU) to conduct a standard nutritional survey.

Water for Humans and Animals

¶12. The USAID/OFDA program monitor noted that ground water levels had decreased considerably in several woredas, including Raya Azebo, Atsbi Womberta, and Endeta. According to woreda officials, ponds and springs are also dry, necessitating construction of new ponds and springs and/or rehabilitation of existing water sources, particularly in lowland communities bordering Afar Region. In addition, REST noted the need for emergency boreholes in Raya Azebo Woreda.

Future Concerns and Actions to Date

¶13. While regional government, NGO, and donor relief efforts have helped stabilize the humanitarian situation in Tigray, continued efforts are necessary to sustain food insecure individuals in the coming months. Shortages of water and food for human and animal consumption, malnutrition, and poor crop performance constitute significant challenges for individuals in Tigray that require further attention.

¶14. High prices and limited availability of animal feed may exhaust coping mechanisms during the December to late June dry season in Tigray. Farmers face an increasingly precarious situation, as animals weaken from walking long distances in search of water and individuals consume seeds stocks intended for cultivation. Combined with anticipated food price increases during the dry season, this situation threatens to erode coping mechanisms and endanger crop cultivation during the subsequent rainy season.

¶15. In response to food security concerns, the UN World Food Program is implementing emergency food aid, PSNP, and targeted supplementary feeding programs in Tigray. In addition, the NGO Concern is treating moderate and severe acute malnutrition in federal and regional ENUC-designated priority woredas in Tigray through a USAID/OFDA grant. USAID/OFDA will continue to monitor the situation in Tigray and report on humanitarian conditions. In addition, the U.S. Ambassador and USAID Mission Director plan to travel to Tigray next month to further assess the situation and demonstrate support for emergency feeding programs.

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